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# DECORATION & FURNITURE

## BOULE AND HIS WORK.



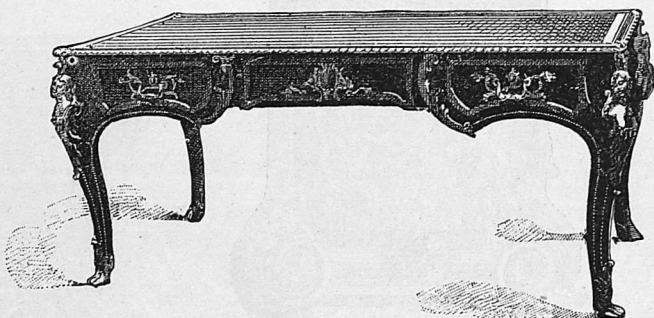
THE student of the history of furniture will find much more Boule work in existence than information concerning André Boule himself. His seems to have been one of those careers which, prominent enough in their time, and leaving evidence enough of activity after them, have

never occupied the pens of their generation, and therefore left little for ours to read. We know that some of the most celebrated sales of art objects have been of Boule work, that specimens of it have never ceased to hold places of honor in the cabinets of collectors, and that it commands extraordinary prices to-day, but of Boule himself, his ambitions, ideals, struggles, disappointments, we know scarcely more than can be told in a dozen lines.

André Charles Boule was born in Paris in 1642. He had by nature a strong bias toward an artistic career, and but for the fact that his father was a cabinet-maker and determined to fix his son in the same trade, we might perhaps have seen the name in the list of distinguished painters of his century instead of merely associated with "meubles de luxe" and renowned as that of the most celebrated cabinet-maker of France. Nothing is known of his youth, and it can only be conjectured that it was passed in his father's shop until such time as the elegance, splendor, and ingenuity of his work attracted the attention of Louis XIV. It is certain that wherever he worked his imagination was active in invention, and the color sense vital if yet undisciplined, for these were the artistic qualities which later helped him to his enduring renown. The century was one of extreme activity in the decorative arts, and its peculiarity was that both artist and artisan seemed equally inspired with the ambitions of the time, and struggled, each in his sphere, to reach what to him seemed perfection. It was a time when Mansart was building palaces whose walls Le Brun decorated and for which Le Nôtre designed geometrically artificial gardens, while the extravagant taste of one of the most sumptuous of monarchs demanded a splendor of furnishing equal to that of their environment. Louis XIV. knew how to appreciate intelligent artists who could harmonize their work with the architecture, painting, and statuary that gave character to his luxury, and after using Boule's taste for a time as designer at the then highly flourishing Gobelins, he made him first cabinet-maker to the king and confirmed the title by a brevet. In this brevet Boule was named as sculptor, architect, and engraver, as well as "ébéniste," which fact proves that the famous artisan was an artist in more forms than one. Of his skill in these arts no proof has come down to us save in the perfection of the graving of the medallions frequently repeated on the Boule buffets and cabinets, and the good taste of the bas-reliefs and figurines with which they are so often decorated.

No cabinet-maker ever had greater originality than Boule. It was his native taste, unprompted by previous examples, which exerted such a powerful influence on the style characteristic of the art of his epoch. No one before him had ever worked with

such consummate skill and happy effect in combining and contrasting variously colored exotic woods, ebony, violet, rose, satin, and amaranth, with incrustations and sculptures of copper, ormolu, silver, tortoise-shell, bronze, and ivory. He represented on his works all sorts of animals, shells, fruits, and flowers. With the same materials he composed pictures, historical subjects, hunting scenes, battles, and landscapes. His furniture was all palatial, official, grandiose—the kind best fitted for the gigantic apartments required in the reign of Louis Quatorze. It was unsuited for domestic life and real use, and its purpose was chiefly monumental, to fill spaces between royal windows and sustain vases of goldsmiths' work, jasper and porphyry with gilt mountings, and a glitter of porcelain reflected by many mirrors.



BOULE TABLE.

It is a curious fact, considering the liberality of the king, and the great fame as well as great quantity of Boule's works, that his life, like that of so many other artists, was a constant struggle with financial embarrassments. In Boule's case the secret of the anomaly may not be difficult to find. Thwarted in his desire to be an artist pure and simple, he became an artistic collector, and spent extravagant sums on his cabinets of drawings and engravings. There was no sale of engravings and drawings which he did not attend and

objects destroyed—an irreparable loss—were sixty portraits by Vandyck of which all the proofs were retouched by the hand of the master himself.

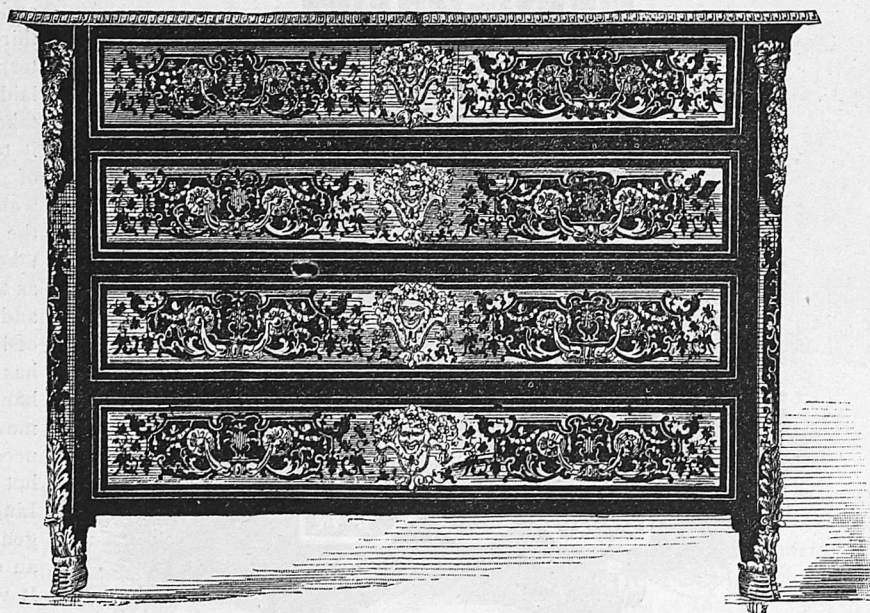
Boule was so tormented by his creditors that the king, touched by his distress, offered him shelter in the Louvre, then a place of refuge; but his creditors were not to be thus baffled, and addressed a letter to the king, praying for leave to pursue him even there, with what result history does not say.

Boule died in 1732, at ninety years of age, leaving a school of imitators behind him, as well as sons, who, however, in continuing the tradition of their father, made it a tradition from which the genius was missing, and of which the forms soon degenerated into incoherent and extravagant mannerism. The most celebrated of his imitators were Crescent, first cabinet-maker to the regent, and Caffieri.

The articles of Boule furniture generally most esteemed are of ebony, the large surfaces being covered with inlaid work of tortoise-shell, cut out and incrustated with arabesques, branches of foliage and ornaments in thin brass and white metal, and sometimes enriched by elaborate graving with the burin. Jacquemart describes as follows the methods of Boule, and fairly estimates his talent: "To give the desired exactness to the work of incrustation, the artist imagined the plan of superposing two plates of equal size and thickness, one of metal, the other of tortoise-shell, and after having traced his design, cutting them out with the same stroke of the saw; he thus obtained four

proofs of the composition, two where the design appeared in hollow spaces and two which, when placed in the hollows of the opposite ground pieces, filled them exactly and without any perceptible joining. The result of this practice was seen in two different yet simultaneous pieces of furniture; one, designated as the first part, was the tortoise-shell ground with metal applications; the other, called the second part, was metal with tortoise-shell arabesques. Boule in his great compositions found means to add to the splendor of the effects, by simultaneously employing the first and second parts in suitably balanced masses. While admitting the good effect as a whole of the two styles invented by Boule, we must insist that the first part should be held in higher estimation, as being the more complete. Let us take for example one of the beautiful types issued from the hands of the artist, and we shall see with what intelligence the elaborate graving corrects the coldness of certain outlines; the shells trace their furrows of light, the draperies of the canopies fall in cleverly disordered folds, the grotesque heads grin, the branches of foliage are lightened by the strongly marked nerves of the leaves according to the importance of the masses; everything lives and has a language. Observe the counterpart; it is but the reflection of the idea, the faded shadow of the original."

Buyers of Boule must be on their guard, for the genuine work is comparatively scarce, and the imitations are generally wretched. Some of the imitators of Boule produced gaudy objects in which the tortoise-shell parts are replaced by horn, colored blue or vermilion—coloring which destroys at once the serious harmony which lends so much to the dignity of the work of the master. Most of these deviations are attributed by Jacquemart to Philippe Poitou who in 1683 became cabinet-maker to the King of France. At the present day, connoisseurs are warned by him to beware of different sorts of counterfeits; "many of



BOULE COMMODE WITH MARQUETRY OF SHELL AND COPPER.

where he did not purchase, often without the means of paying; he borrowed money at huge interest, and at each new sale repeated the fatal expedient. His collection became immense, and his debts still more so. It was a mania of which he strove in vain to cure himself. To complete his misfortunes a fire destroyed a large portion of this collection, one of the rarest and most extensive that ever existed. The remainder was sold at auction, and so great was the quantity spared by the flames that, although but a fraction of the whole, the sale lasted several days. Among the



the old pieces of furniture in the Boule style have had their panels destroyed and replaced by pieces of lacquer, sometimes they have even been imitated by preserving and restoring the framework of incrustated ebony. There have been seen, indeed, some Boule pieces with oriental lacquer; but they are very rare, and the foreign pieces in them were selected with great care, and from among those of the first quality."

Our illustrations show the various kinds of Boule work. The clock was in the famous San Donato collection. Like the "commode" opposite—a sort of table bureau—to be seen in the Mazarine Library at Paris, it is of the period of Louis XIV. The "armoire" or wardrobe, designed by Le Brun, is a magnificent piece of furniture nearly ten feet high, which has been seen successively in the collections of the Louvre, the Duc d'Aumont and Fonthill, and, at the dispersion of the Hamilton Palace collection last year, finally passed into the possession of Wertheimer, the London dealer, who paid for it, together with a companion piece, over \$60,000.

At a recent sale in London, at Christie's, of some valuable decorative objects removed from Arundel Castle and Norfolk House, in the collection were several pieces of Boule. About \$1200 was paid for a red Boule coffer on stand mounted with corners, bands, and masks of chased ormolu. A reporter of *The Artist* says: "Mr. Watson bought two cheap lots in a pair of handsome marquetry winged cabinets, for which he gave £30 gs.; a very good red Boule table was knocked down to Mr. Litchfield for £75 12s.; while a similar table, but with the serious drawback of having a great part of the Boule work only 'counterpart,' was proportionately dear to Mr. Albert Sassoon's secretary at £76 13s. It may just be mentioned that, apart from the value of the workmanship in the mounts, the worth of Boule work is considerably affected by the cutting being 'part,' or 'counterpart.' When the design is cut out in sheet brass and tortoiseshell, the remaining or refuse portion of the sheet of brass contains as it were the 'negative' of the design, and this though worked up and engraved with much skill, is never appreciated by the cognoscenti, nor bought at a high figure."

#### WALL DECORATION.

THE application of the solid relief decoration, known as Lincrusta-Walton, to more artistic purposes than have hitherto been accorded to it by the manufacturers in this country, promises to increase greatly its value in the hands of the architect and the cabinet-maker. Specimen strips of the material, lately shown us, contained sharply defined impressions of some of the most charming floral designs and gambolling cupids by Boucher and other ornamentists of his school. Certain pieces were admirably adapted for the inlaying of furniture as friezes or panels—in fact, were reproductions of famous works used for such purposes by artists like Riesener and Gouthière—and others, bolder in design, were no less suitable for mural decoration. It is certainly a valuable property in the material that, while in its transient state its ductility enables it to take ornamental relief boldly and clearly, it hardens like wood, and then may be tooled to any desired degree of finish. In the manufacturer's circular before us, it is urged in favor of the material that, in its bold, handsome relief, it looks like wood-carving. We are told: "Some of the finest examples of modern carving have been executed at great expense for ocean-going steamships. The lightness and waterproof character of the new material render it peculiarly adaptable for use in steamship

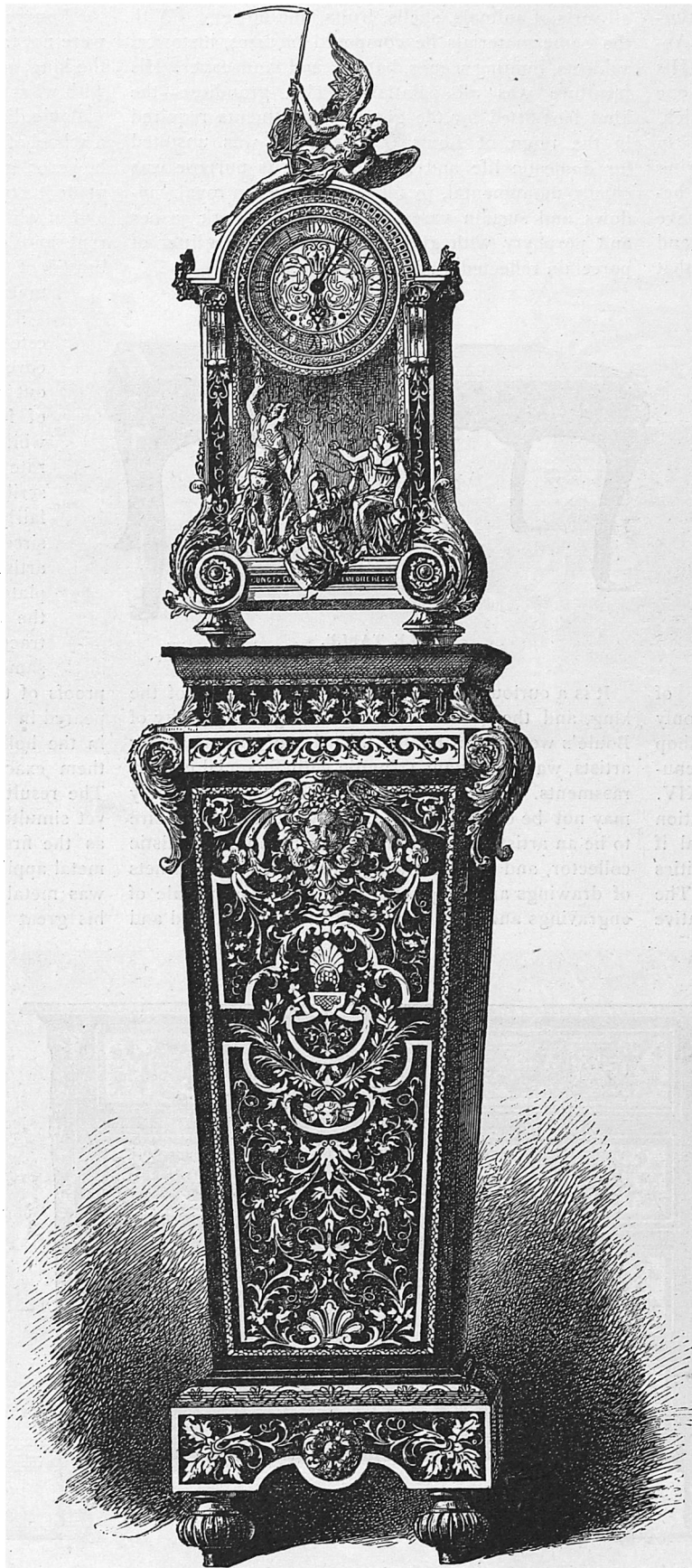
saloons, as well as in pleasure yachts. No racking or straining of the ship will crack it. It gives a warmth, dryness and comfort which cannot be obtained from other material on shipboard, and the rough and wholesome scrubbing to which cabin walls are periodically subjected on a well-conducted passenger ship will always leave its surface uninjured." Again, we read in the pamphlet referred to: "In the ornamentation of churches, Lincrusta-Walton has a great future before it. Some of the reliefs already produced in Lincrusta closely resemble the wood-

own peculiar qualities. Let it look like itself and nothing else. Some persons of bad taste may paint it to look like wood; but we believe such an imitation would be about as artistic as it would be to paint india-rubber to look like wood. The implied suggestion that the House of God should contain such a sham as machine-made "ancient carvings" is really shocking. Surely, nothing but truth should enter into the adornment of the Abode of Truth. Use Lincrusta in churches by all means. In many ways it would be valuable. But use it for what it is.

As a wall covering we have already spoken of it at some length. But of its practical value in this respect, we suppose the best evidence lies in the interesting fact that a firm of wall-paper manufacturers of the prominence of Messrs. Fr. Beck & Co. has found it worth while to buy the controlling interest in the concern which manages the operations of the company in this country. The first thing done by the new proprietors seems to have been to reduce greatly the cost of the material to the public. This was wise; for before it was somewhat too expensive for persons of moderate means. That is to say, the first cost was above their means; for it may be a question whether—inasmuch as the material can be stripped off the walls and used again and again, in case of removal—it was not even at the old price as cheap in the end as good wall-paper.

While speaking of its application to wall surfaces, we take the opportunity of answering some correspondents who have asked for information as to the method of fixing the material. In a descriptive pamphlet before us, it is given as follows: "The greatest care should be observed in cutting the edges straight. This is best done by means of a straight edge, which should be either wholly of iron, or if of wood, have an iron or steel edge. The straight edge is placed on the edge of the Lincrusta, and the material is cut to the design margin with a sharp knife, the same being held at a slight inward inclination, so as to undercut the material and thus insure a good joint. The piece is then divided into the necessary lengths for panels, dados, etc., as may be required. The workmen can then proceed to fix these pieces to the wall. This is done with glue and paste (made in the proportion of one-third of the former to two-thirds of the latter), as thick as it is possible to use it, and laid on lightly with a stiff brush. Then take a little piece of Lincrusta and attach it to the wall under the cornice by means of gimps pins, and gradually press it to the wall, making the joint good until it reaches the bottom. In doing this, care should be taken to work from the centre outward, so as to avoid the air getting under the piece and preventing adhesion. The appearance of blisters on the surface after the material has been fixed is occasioned by imperfect hanging; the blisters can be easily removed by pricking the surface with a needle so as to allow the air to escape. A hot iron should then be held near to the Lincrusta, and the place operated upon gently pressed to the wall, thus obtaining an even and uniform surface appearance. It will be found easy to hang as there is no danger of tearing it; and should it be soiled in the operation, a little soap and water, or spirits of turpentine applied with a sponge, will very quickly remove any dirt after the wall is completed. All wood and gilt mouldings should be fixed over the edge, and not butted against the edges of the decoration."

For practical purposes, this information, of course, is not needed by the tenant, for whom the dealer will put it up as he would ordinary wall paper; but it is interesting all the same to him as giving some idea of the nature of the material. Lincrusta comes in lengths like wall-paper; but, being in solid relief,



BOULE CLOCK-STAND AND CLOCK.

IN THE LATE SAN DONATO COLLECTION.

carvings of the choirs of old cathedrals. Any ancient carvings may be reproduced, or modern designs embodied in the new material for interior ecclesiastical decorations and ecclesiastical furniture." The claim that Lincrusta panels may be made to look like wood-carvings is doubtless true, but if the proprietors are as wise as we think they are, they will not insist too much on this resemblance. The material has its